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Curb On C.I.A.?

ECHOES OF last spring's disastrous invasion of Cuba will soon be heard on Capitol Hill. Because the Central Intelligence Agency pulled the strings in that attempt to topple Castro's dictatorship, and because the attempt failed, new life has been injected into an old proposal to subject this super-secret arm of the federal government to a degree of congressional supervision.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is going to put down for public hearing a resolution sponsored by Sen. Eugene J. McCarthy, D-Minn., and cosponsored by 18 other Democratic senators and three Republican senators. The resolution, introduced shortly after the anti-Castro forces met disaster at the Bay of Pigs last April, would establish a joint congressional committee to exercise "some kind of continuing supervision over foreign policy activities and foreign intelligence . . . programs."

A similar proposal was rejected by the Senate, 59 to 27, in 1956. Sen. Carl Hayden declared then that "congress has no right . . . to regulate an agency . . . designed solely to provide the President with information to enable him to make decisions." Considerable concern was expressed also lest establishment of such a committee lead to disclosure by members of the committee of information that should be held secret. Yet the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, on which the proposed new joint committee would be patterned, has functioned satisfactorily in another highly sensitive field.

Dissatisfaction with the C.I.A.'s performance in the Cuban affair, and growing uneasiness over the agency's participation in undercover operations of that character, may win the present proposal for congressional oversight of foreign intelligence activities a more sympathetic hearing than it received in 1956. Everyone recognizes that effective intelligence-gathering activities are vital to the security of the United States. But whether an intelligence agency should engage also in freewheeling paramilitary operations that may, if unsuccessful, gravely compromise the country's interests and prestige now seems debatable.

It is understood that, following the Cuban invasion, both the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and a special board of inquiry headed by Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor recommended that conduct of paramilitary operations be turned over to the Defense Department. While President Kennedy is believed to have placed some curbs on C.I.A., he is not known to have stripped it of responsibility for undercover operations unrelated to intelligence gathering. Reorganization of the agency is now proceeding under leadership of its new director, former Atomic Energy Commission Chairman John A. McCone.